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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CANBERRA 001433

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR DRL/IL and IO/S GEORGE ABRAHAMS
STATE ALSO FOR IO/T RICK DRISCOLL
GENEVA FOR CHARLES STONECIPHER

E.O.12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [KTDB](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: GOA AND UNIONS TAKE THEIR FIGHT TO THE ILO

REF: CANBERRA 1205 and previous

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Australia's union leaders have gone overseas to seek guidance from their counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere to strengthen their campaign against the Howard Government's proposed labor law reforms. The Government of Australia (GOA), meanwhile, has restarted its regional labor diplomacy efforts after a long hiatus and was elected in June to the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Governing Council, the International Labor Council (ILC). The ILC seat should serve Australia well as the GOA seeks to promote its international labor agenda and to defend itself against criticism of its domestic labor reform plans (reftel). End summary.

ACTU/GOA Fight Goes Global

[1](#)2. (SBU) Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President Sharan Burrow (protect) told CG Melbourne on August 22 that the ACTU had been consulting organized labor overseas for advice on countering the Howard Government's proposed labor law reforms. The ACTU's domestic political allies, the Australian Labor Party and other opposition parties, lost the power to block Government legislation on August 9 when the Coalition took control of both houses of Parliament. Having lost their protector in Parliament, Australian unions have begun taking their complaints abroad to organizations such as the ILO in an effort to bring international pressure to bear on the Howard Government.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Burrow, who also heads the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' Asia-Pacific Regional Organization and was recently re-elected to the ILO's Tripartite Governing Body as the Asia-Pacific delegate, is well placed to stoke international concern about the Coalition's alleged "anti-worker" agenda. In June, Burrow added a preemptive complaint against the GOA's upcoming labor reform bill to a series of existing complaints the ACTU had already lodged with the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Treaties. The Committee has deferred its consideration of the new complaint to September when it expects the GOA to have released the details of its proposed legislative package.

Government Revives Labor Diplomacy

[1](#)4. (SBU) Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' Director of International [labor] Affairs Scott Evans (protect) told us on August 17 that the Government had expected to face increased scrutiny from various ILO expert committees following complaints from the ACTU and individual unions. According to Evans, in the past year the GOA had revived its traditional labor diplomacy objective of promoting higher labor standards in Asia and the Pacific, and had managed to garner support for its re-election to the ILC after a nine-year absence. Evans argued that the Coalition's re-engagement with the ILO was "an extension" of its post-9/11 foreign policy objective of exerting a positive, democratic influence in the region. In April, Evans noted, the GOA had hosted the ILO's Second Southeast Asia and Pacific Sub-Regional Tripartite Forum on Decent Work. After the meeting, Evans was tasked with delivering on the GOA's commitment to develop a regional occupational health and safety inspection training program. A former Australian diplomat, Evans was enthusiastic about the GOA's re-emerging interest in labor diplomacy and his advising role on Australia's obligations under ILO treaties.

Comment

[1](#)5. (SBU) The GOA's reengagement with the ILO, its seat on the ILC, and its effort to improve labor standards in the region are all welcome developments. It is too early to tell, however, if the Howard Government's renewed interest in labor diplomacy is principally about advancing the international labor agenda of Australia and like-minded

countries, or if it has more to do with the GOA defending
itself against the expected raft of union complaints brought
before the ILO. End Comment.
STANTON